

The following is the introductory book chapter from one of the best introductory books on anarchism, which is unfortunately out of print. This is excerpted from *\*Reinventing Anarchy: What are the anarchists thinking these days?\** edited by Howard J. and Carol Ehrlich and others, and published by Routledge & Kegan Paul in 1979.

## Questions and answers about anarchism

### The editors

#### 1 How would an anarchist revolution come about?

For social anarchists revolution is a process, a process leading to the total deflation of state authority. That process entails self- and collective education and the building of alternative institutions as mechanisms of survival, of training and as models of a new society.

Continuing parts of that process are repeated symbolic protests and direct assaults on ruling class institutions.

As more and more people regard the anarchist alternatives as preferable to the status quo, state power begins to be deflated. When the state can no longer maintain the confidence of substantial segments of the population, its agents will have to rely increasingly on the mobilization of the police and the military. Of course, that increase in force has multiple possible outcomes, ranging from the total repression of the Left to the further leftward mobilization of the population that regards this increased use of force illegitimate.

Our scenario does not rule out guerrilla warfare and armed struggle. But in the United States, for example, with its mammoth police apparatus, extensive files and surveillance of radicals, and its over 3,600 underground 'emergency operating centers' for ruling-class and military retreats, the idea of a primarily military revolution is an atavistic Marxist fantasy.

So where do we go from here? The next act in the revolutionary drama remains to be written. Drawing a battle plan today seems pointless. The overthrow of the state - the building of anarchist societies - will be an overwhelming majoritarian act. It cannot be otherwise. When, say, 5-10 per cent of the population identify themselves as anarchists, it is our guess that there would be a range of contingencies available that we could not possibly anticipate today.

#### 2 Who will make the anarchist revolution?

Everyone. Every day in their daily lives.

#### 3 How can an anarchist society prevent the development of informal elites, new bureaucracies and a reconcentration of power?

There is nothing integral to the nature of human social organization that makes hierarchy, centralization and elitism inescapable. These organizational forms

persist, in part because they serve the interests of those at the top. They persist, too, because we have learned to accept roles of leadership and followership; we have come to define hierarchy as necessary, and centralization as efficient. All of this is to say that we learned the ideological justifications for elite organizational forms quite well.

We could dismiss the question by pointing out that social motivations to power, elites and elitism and bureaucracy would not exist in an anarchist society. The question should not be dismissed, however, when we talk about building an anarchist society in the shell of another. In such a context we will inevitably be struggling against the life-denying values of our socialization. Hierarchy, dominance and submission, repression and power - these are facts of everyday life. Revolution is a process. and even the eradication of coercive institutions will not automatically create a liberatory society. We create that society by building new institutions, by changing the character of our social relationships. by changing ourselves - and throughout that process by changing the distribution of power in society. It is by the constant building of new forms of organization, by the continual critical evaluation of our successes and failures, that we prevent old ideas and old forms of organization from re-emerging. If we cannot begin this revolutionary project here and now, then we cannot make a revolution.

#### 4 How will decisions be made? by consensus? by majority?

Groups will make decisions by consensus because majority rule is unacceptable for people who think that everyone should run his or her own life. Decision-making by majority rule means that the minority voluntarily gives up control over the policies that affect them. To operate by consensus, groups will discuss an issue until it is resolved to the satisfaction of everyone. This doesn't mean that there's only one way of doing things. People must accept that many ways can coexist. They also must realize that there can be multiple policies on most issues with people free to choose which policy they want.

The principle of consensus can be effective because membership in a community is voluntary and because that membership entails agreements on its basic goals and values.

The workings of consensual decisions have many advantages. It is the only way to prevent a permanent minority from developing. It takes into consideration the strength of feelings. It is more efficient for group action because people are genuinely involved in achieving consensus and are therefore more likely to act on their decisions.

One of the things people have difficulty understanding about group consensus is that it does take into account the strength of feelings and differences in perspectives of all of the people involved. In a social anarchist meeting the process of decision-making is as important as the outcome itself.

Of course, people will have to learn to recognize what they want and to express their desires in a constructive way. If they do not know what they want a false consensus develops because people are just trying to go along with the group so as not to make trouble. If decisions are reached this way people remain

unhappy about the outcome; their participation may drop to a low level and they may ultimately feel that they have to leave the group.

5 How can people be motivated to participate in decisions that affect them if they don't want to participate?

In the kinds of societies in which we live now, this is a pseudo-question. People are managed; they are rarely asked to participate. The unmotivated citizen of the capitalist/socialist state has sized up the situation correctly, and has concluded that non-participation is the only realistic choice .

What about an anarchist community, where everyone would have genuine control over his or her life? We would assume that nonparticipants would be few - but if they existed, we would have to ask why. This is no idle question: if it wished to survive, an anarchist community would have to solve this problem. If it failed to do so, the community would be on the road back to social inequality. And it would no longer be anarchist.

There are two reasons why a person might not participate in making decisions. The first would be lack of time. But if a person is too busy, then either s/he has voluntarily taken on too much work, or the others are shirking. In neither case is the community functioning on genuine social anarchist principles.

The second reason is quite different. Non-participation would be due not to working too much out of a misplaced sense of priorities, but to failure to see the linkage between personal autonomy and community functioning. Some people may feel that community decision-making is beneath them; this 'star' mentality needs to be effectively challenged every time it occurs. Others may genuinely believe that the community affords them everything they need for their physical and psychological well-being, so they are perfectly happy letting others make the decisions. Still others may feel alienated, or lack confidence in their ability to make competent decisions. All of these people are handicapped by 'old ideas.' These are well suited to a stratified society in which a few run the lives of everyone, but they are severely damaging to an anarchist community. People who think in these ways need loving support from others, a feeling of being an essential part of the community, and gentle (but firm) pressure to participate. This may take time, but it can be done.

6 When does a community become too large to operate with direct participation by everyone? Is a system of representation ever justified?

We do not really know the maximum or optimum size of a community that would still allow effective participation, but there are numerous examples of communities, some as large as 8,000 people, where all the people actively participated in self-government. For example, during the Spanish Revolution self-governed villages all over Spain formed into federations to co-ordinate decisions affecting all of them. In Denmark in 1971 about 600 people occupied an army camp and set up a viable functioning community that not only lasted for years but was able to defend itself nonviolently from attacks by the government.

In these examples everyone made decisions about the goals of the community and how to achieve them. Then the people who were actually doing the particular tasks were able to work in their own way.

In a decentralized society that is composed of many communities the lines of communication go in multiple directions. Two-way television and other technological improvements make direct democracy possible in larger groups, but there will probably still be times when representatives will be necessary. Selection procedures for these representatives would no doubt vary. Sometimes representatives could be drawn by lot and other times on the basis of task-specific skills or abilities.

The system of representation, however, must meet certain criteria. Representatives must come from the group of people whom they represent and they must be accountable to that group. To make them accountable, representatives should be assigned for a brief period of time or to do a specific task. In an anarchist society nobody could make a career of 'politics.' The role of representative could be rotated among members of the community. All important decisions would be made by the group as a whole; the representatives would just communicate the decisions of their group to the larger group. Representatives must also be subject to immediate recall.

The decisions about what functions best for one community or one group will have to be made by that group at the time depending upon the circumstances. But there is every reason to believe that people can effectively participate in managing their own lives.

7 Will there still be experts and specialization? If so, how will experts be trained? How will we know they are competent? Can we have experts in a non-hierarchical society?

Differences in skill and knowledge will continue to exist. Such differences are compatible with a free and egalitarian society. People may also want to develop their abilities in their own way. And this too is compatible with social anarchism.

Much of the work that is now done by specialists can be learned in a relatively short time so that it could be done by nearly everyone. One problem with specialists in our society is that they restrain the number of people who are trained. Obviously there is some work, such as surgery or architecture, that requires a high degree of skill acquired through lengthy training. No one wants to be operated on by someone who has only two weeks of training, and few people would feel comfortable in a five-story building assembled without blueprints. The real problem becomes training specialists who will be accountable to the people they serve. We want co-operation between specialist and 'client,' not solidarity among specialists. To ensure this there could be no positions of privilege for specialists, and they must be committed to sharing their knowledge with everyone. In a decentralized or small society, judging the competence of someone whose labor is highly visible, such as a carpenter, is not difficult. In somewhat more complex cases, say in judging the competence of a surgeon, one possibility is to have the people who work with the surgeon along with those from the community be the judge of the quality of work .

Expertise and non-hierarchy can co-exist only if specialization does not convey special privileges: only if people who are experts do not monopolize or control resources or information; and only if people are committed to co-operative and collective work rather than destructive competition.

## 8 Who will do the dirty work?

We all will. In an anarchist community, people wouldn't categorize work as 'dirty' or clean,' as 'white-collar' or 'blue-collar.' That way of thinking can exist only in a class-stratified society - one that teaches its members that maintenance tasks are undignified, demeaning, and to be avoided if possible. For anarchists, all socially useful work has dignity. And everyone would co-operate to sustain the community at a mutually agreed-upon level of health, comfort and beauty. Those who refuse to collect the garbage, clean streets and buildings, trim the grass, provide a clean water supply and so on would be acting in a most irresponsible fashion. If they continued to refuse, they would be asked to leave. Does this seem coercive? A successfully self-governed community must be comprised of people who voluntarily live and work together, who agree on the necessary tasks, and who have the self-discipline to carry out their share of these tasks (no more and no less). Those who refuse are coercing others; they are implicitly saying that their time is to be spent doing more important things; that they are above such menial tasks. In an anarchist community no one is 'above' anyone else; no one is more important than anyone else. To think so will destroy both equality and freedom.

One of the things that makes 'dirty' work so onerous is that only some people do it, and they work at it full-time. Very few maintenance tasks would seem totally awful if they were rotated, and each person knew s/he would be doing it for a short period of time. Short work periods on the garbage truck, or cleaning public bathrooms or fertilizing fields would seem - well, not ,fun of course (anarchists aren't stupid) but would be tolerable if each person knew they would end soon.

## 9 Will any people have more money and property than others? Who will control the means of production and how will profits be distributed?

In an anarchist society everyone will have an equal right to the basic liberties and material goods. which is consistent with a similar right for others. People would, of course, maintain personal possessions, but we would expect that the matter of the accumulation of property and property rights would be very different. Certainly the meaning of money and property would be quite different in an egalitarian and nonhierarchical society. It is hard to conceive of a serious alternative to a market economy. However, unlike the capitalist market place, the anarchist economy would not be based on the maximization of control and profit. Therefore, there would be no need to monopolize resources, expand markets or create useless products and/or consumer demands. Worker and community control of the workplace would be the organizational form for regulating productivity and profits in keeping with the

needs of the community . While an anarchist economic theory remains to be written, its theorems will all have to be derived from principles of social justice, from principles that claim the maximum values of freedom and equality for all people.

10 Aren't anarchists ignoring the complexity of urban life? Aren't they rejecting technology and industrial development? Don't they really want to go back to a simpler society?

Any anarchists who ignore the complexities of modern urban-industrial societies are wrong. A return to a 'simpler' society' is a fantasy of escapists, not of persons seriously committed to building a new society. The underlying issue for us as social anarchists is the determination of the optimum size for urban settlements. The equation for an optimum size would doubtless have to balance factors of self-sufficiency, self governance and the minimizing of damage to the ecosystem.

The related technological problems must be taken seriously by all anarchists. Can we satisfy our energy requirements with technologies that do minimal environmental damage? Can we develop a technology that can be comprehended by most people? Can we develop a technology that is a genuine substitute for human labor? The answer to these questions is yes. The technology and knowledge are already here: the issue is their implementation. The result of implementing such technological changes and building self-governing and relatively self-sufficient communities would probably bring about substantial differences in urban settlements. We suspect that these differences would yield even more 'complex' urban arrangements than we now have. We suspect, too, that they would result in more genuinely humane cities.

11 How will an anarchist society meet the threat of foreign invasion?

Paradoxically, the more successfully it meets the threat of armed force, the more likely it is to move away from anarchist principles. War always seems to turn relatively free and open societies into repressive ones. Why? Because war is irrational: it fosters fear and hopelessness in the gentle; it brings out aggression, hatred and brutality in the truculent; it destroys the balance between people and nature; it shrinks the sense of community down to one's immediately endangered group; and under conditions of starvation and deprivation it pits neighbor against neighbor in the fight for survival. If a besieged anarchist community did successfully resist foreign invasion, then it should immediately work to reestablish the interrelationships of trust, mutual aid, equality and freedom that have probably been damaged. 'War is the health of the state;' but it can be a fatal disease for an anarchist community.

If war came, however, how would the society organize to defend itself? Let us assume that the anarchist federation of North America is invaded by troops of the Chinese, Swedish, Saudi Arabian or Brazilian government. What would happen? There would be no state apparatus to seize; instead, the invaders would have to conquer a network of small communities, one by one.

There would be no single army to defeat, but an entire, armed population. The people would challenge the invasion with resistance - strikes, psychological warfare, and non-co-operation as well as with guerrilla tactics and larger armed actions. Under these circumstances, it is unlikely that the invaders would conquer the federation .

## 12 What about crime?

Much of what is now defined as crime would no longer exist. The communalization of property and an ethic of mutual aid would reduce both the necessity and the motivation for property crimes. Crimes against people seem more complex, but we reject the idea that they are rooted in 'original sin' or 'human nature.' To the degree that such crimes stem from societally based disorders of personality, we can only anticipate that their incidence - as well as their actual form - would be radically altered .

In a social anarchist society, crime would be defined solely as an act harmful to the liberties of others. It would not be a crime to be different from other people, but it would be a crime to harm someone. Such hostile acts against the community could be prevented, above all, by inculcating a respect for the dignity of each person. Anarchist values would be reinforced with the strongest of human bonds, those of affection and self-respect.

Remaining crimes would not be administered by masses of lawyers, police and judges; and criminals would not be tossed into prisons, which Kropotkin once labeled 'universities of crime.' Common law and regularly rotated juries could decide whether a particular act was a crime, and could criticize, censure, ostracize or even banish the criminal. However, in most cases we anticipate that criminals would be placed in the care and guidance of members of the community.

## 13 How shall public health issues be handled?

Public health issues would be handled like all other issues. This means that decisions about inoculations and other health issues would be made at the local level by the people who would be affected by the decision. This would result in a very different type of health care. Health care workers would be members of the community where they worked. Their function would be to provide day-to-day care and advice to people on how to remain healthy. People would have a chance to talk frequently with these workers and would know that they were really concerned about health and not about making money or gaining status in the community.

If there were a threatened epidemic of some deadly flu and a vaccine were developed the people in the community would be able to get together to discuss the risks and benefits of the inoculations. Once the group decided that inoculations would benefit the community they would try to persuade everyone to be inoculated because the more people who were protected the less likelihood there would be of an epidemic. If there were a clear case of people being a danger to the health of the entire community then they would be asked

to make a choice between being vaccinated and remaining in the community, or leaving to find another group that was more compatible.

14 There are times when the state takes care of the sick and elderly, or protects individuals against coercion (for example, children brutalized by parents; blacks attacked by whites). If the state disappears, who will take over these functions?

People who look at the world this way believe that there are only two possibilities: either there is state regulation and an orderly society, or there is a stateless chaos in which life is nasty, brutish and short. In fact, even when the state functions in a benevolent or protective manner, it is capricious: sometimes it helps the helpless; other times it doesn't. Sometimes social welfare workers remove a child from a vicious environment - and other times the child is left at home, perhaps to be further brutalized, even killed. Sometimes the state protects the civil rights of oppressed minorities; other times it ignores these rights, or even joins in the persecution. We cannot count on the state to do anything to protect us. It is, after all, the major task of the agents of the state to protect the distribution of power. Social justice is a secondary concern.

In fact, we can only count on ourselves, or on those with whom we are freely associated in community. This means that helping functions will be performed by those groups that have always done them, with or without the state: voluntary associations. However, in an anarchist community, the need for such services will be less frequent. For example, if there is no longer systematic poisoning of the environment, diseases caused by this pollution (pesticide poisoning, asbestosis, Minimata disease) won't happen; if there are no longer extremes of wealth and poverty, diseases caused by lack of adequate food, shelter, and medical care will not exist; if children and adults can freely choose whether or not to live together, much violence against loved ones will disappear; if racism is systematically attacked, then the majority ethnic group won't harass minorities. There will, of course, still be a need for mutual aid and protection - but this will be provided by the community, for all its members.

15 Would an anarchist society be less likely to be sexist? racist?

Anarchists usually talk about the illegitimacy of authority, basing their arguments on the premise that no person should have power over another. A logical extension of this argument is to attack the power relationships in which men dominate women and some racial and ethnic groups dominate others.

Thus anarchism creates the preconditions for abolishing sexism and racism. Anarchism is philosophically opposed to all manifestations of racism and sexism. Equally important as its philosophical commitments is the fact that with anarchism there would be no economic basis to support racist or sexist ideas or practices. Work and income would be divided equitably, so there would be no need to subordinate a class of people to do the dirty work or to work at low pay to support the dominant class.



Sexism and racism would not automatically disappear in the process of building an anarchist society. A conscious effort would have to be made to change old behavior and attitudes.

#### 16 What do anarchists think about sex, monogamy, and family?

Anarchists believe that how you live your daily life is an important political statement. Most people in industrialized societies spend a significant portion of their lives in what may be the last bulwark of capitalism and state socialism - the monogamous nuclear family. The family serves as the primary agent for reproducing the dominant values of the society, both through the socialization of children and the social control of its members. Within the family all of the pathologies of the larger society are reproduced: privatized social relations, escapism, patriarchal dominance, economic dependency (in capitalist society), consumerism, and the treatment of people as property.

In an anarchist society, social relations will be based on trust, mutual aid, friendship and love. These may occur in the context of the family (if people choose to live in a family setting), but they certainly do not have to. Indeed, these conditions may be more easily achieved outside the family.

Will there be monogamous relations in an anarchist society? Clearly people will have the option to choose how they want to live with whom, and how long they want to live in these relationships. This will of course include the option of monogamy. However, without a system based on patriarchy, economic insecurity and religious or state authority, we doubt that monogamy would be anything more than an anachronism. If and when people did elect to live monogamously, it presumably would be seen as a choice made by both persons. Today, of course, monogamy is considered far more important for women than for men. This is called the double standard: and it has no place in a society of free and equal women and men.

The family? The nuclear family is not universal, but social systems for the rearing of the young, the care of the elderly, and companionate relations are. We think that whole new forms of communal and collective living arrangements will grow to replace the traditional family system.

Sex? Of course. But this does not mean that all kinds of sexual behavior would be condoned. We cannot imagine a truly anarchist society condoning rape, sexual exploitation of children, or sex that inflicts pain or humiliation, or involves dominance and submission. In sexual behavior, as in all other forms of behavior, social anarchism is based on freedom, trust and respect for the dignity of others. In fact, in an anarchist society sexuality would lose all the inegalitarian and oppressive meanings it now has.

#### 17 Is it coercive to require education for children? What should its content and structure be?

When people today worry about the coercive character of mandatory public education, we think that their concern really stems from the authoritarian character of schooling. Schools are an extension of the state; they reproduce

the class, sex, race and other divisions on which the state is built. In an anarchist society, the social function of schools and the potential of education would be quite different.

Even today, we think that the implications of withholding basic education from young children are far more coercive than the requirement that they be educated. Without at least a minimal level of literacy, people would be much worse off than they already are. In an anarchist society education would, of course, provide far more. Education would be fundamentally liberating because it would help people learn how to learn; and it would teach them much more than they could ever acquire on their own about the physical world and the world of ideas. It would also help them learn to be free and self-directed.

Such education is so important for young children that neither they nor their parents should be able to decide that the child doesn't need it. Bakunin stated the reason well:

Children do not constitute anyone's property they belong only to their own future freedom. But in children this freedom is not yet real; it is only potential. For real freedom based upon a feeling of one's dignity and upon the genuine respect for someone else's freedom and dignity, i.e., upon justice - such freedom can develop in children only through the rational development of their minds, character, and will.

What would anarchist education teach the young? Intellectual and physical skills that help to develop literate, healthy and competent people should be taught. Essential intellectual materials would include some that children now learn, and some that they don't: reading and writing, self-care (emotional and physical), farming and carpentry, cooking, and physical education. Children in the upper elementary grades would be introduced to literature and the other arts, crosscultural materials, and the principles of anarchist community organization and economics. However, the content of these materials should reflect anarchist values: it would be senseless to teach the principles of capitalist politics and economics (except perhaps as a horrible example), an acceptance of stratification, or materials that advocate racist, sexist or other inegalitarian ideas.

Not only the content, but also the structure of anarchist education is vitally important. It is difficult to develop liberatory modes of thought and action in an atmosphere of intimidation, regimentation, boredom and respect for authority. We do not mean to imply that children should devalue teachers; but genuine respect must be based upon what someone knows and how effectively s/he teaches it, not upon position, age or credentials. It will be difficult to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and orderly process without imposing discipline. But liberatory education cannot take place in an authoritarian setting.

What else? Well, schools should be small, so that each child can get the attention and stimulation s/he needs. Activities should be varied, and distinctions between work and play narrowed as far as possible. Grading and competition with each other would be eliminated. Students would learn to set standards for themselves, and to try to meet them. (If they did not, the child should not evaluate him/herself negatively. Guilt and self-deprecation are enemies of autonomy and healthy functioning ) Teachers would be selected on

the basis of knowledge and interpersonal competence, not upon the possession of formal credentials. Probably few people would make a career of teaching, but many members of the community (including some older children) would spend time doing it. Schools would be integrated into the community, and everyone would participate in the direction of the schools.

When would education end? Ideally, never. Instead of being a prison, which inmates flee as soon as the guard's back is turned (which is what many public schools are like today), the anarchist school would encourage people to see education as a lifelong process. As the child becomes an adult, education would increasingly become an informal self-directed activity which would take place outside the school. But people would return for further formal study as often, and as long, as they wish.

#### 18 What is the relation of children to authority?

The line between nurturance and the authoritarian control of children is difficult to draw. Perhaps in an anarchist society that boundary line will be more clearly sketched.

Infants and young children are unquestionably dependent on others for their survival. Perhaps the difference between nurturance and authoritarianism arises when a child has acquired the skills for her or his own survival. If we accept that boundary, then we will have to work at determining what those skills minimally are. The skills themselves - once we go beyond the acquisition of language - are not absolute. They are relative to the social conditions under which people live. For example, under capitalism, where income and work are tied together and where both are prerequisites for food, housing, medical care and the like, survival training must last longer. Partly because of this long period of dependency, there has been a strong tradition in such settings to view the child (and young adult) as property, hence at the disposal of the family or state. Certainly, the political economy is one condition that fosters dependence on authority. Fostering authoritarian dependence is, in fact, a major mechanism of social control in capitalist and state socialist societies. Today it is easier to catalog examples of dependence and authoritarian social conditions than it is to provide examples of social conditions that encourage self-management and autonomous behavior.

The quintessence of nurturant child-rearing in an anarchist community would be the teaching of children to like themselves, to learn how to learn, and how to set standards for self-evaluation.

#### 19 Has there ever been a successful anarchist organization? If so, why don't they last longer?

Yes, there has been. In fact, there have been many groups that have been organized without centralized government, hierarchy, privilege and formal authority. Some have been explicitly anarchist: perhaps the best-known examples are the Spanish industrial and agricultural collectives, which

functioned quite successfully for several years until destroyed by the combined forces of the authoritarian Left and the Right.

Most anarchist organizations are not called that - even by their members. Anthropological literature is full of descriptions of human societies that have existed without centralized government or institutionalized authority. (However, as contemporary feminist anthropologists point out, many so-called 'egalitarian' cultures are sexist.)

Industrialized societies also contain many groups that are anarchist in practice. As the British anarchist Colin Ward says, 'an anarchist society, a society which organizes itself without authority, is always in existence, like a seed beneath the snow.' Examples include the leaderless small groups developed by radical feminists, co-ops, clinics, learning networks, media collectives, direct action organizations such as the Clamshell Alliance; the spontaneous groupings that occur in response to disasters, strikes, revolutions and emergencies; community-controlled day-care centers; neighborhood groups; tenant and workplace organizing; and so on. Not all such groups are anarchist, of course, but a surprising number function without leadership and authority to provide mutual aid, resist the government, and develop better ways of doing things.

Why don't they last longer? People who ask this question expect anarchist organizations to meet standards of permanence that most anarchists, who value flexibility and change, do not hold; and that most non-anarchist groups cannot meet. There is, of course, another reason why many anarchist organizations do not last longer than they do. Anarchists are enemies of the state - and the state managers do not react kindly to enemies. Anarchist organizations are blocked, harassed, and sometimes (as in the case of Spain, and more recently Portugal) deliberately smashed. Under such circumstances, it is a tribute to the persistence and capabilities of many anarchists that their organizations last as long as they often do.